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Empowering Our Ministry: Christ as Spirit-Empowered Priest

Hebrews 9:1-15

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Several weeks ago, I began an 'arc' of sermons on Jesus' roles as prophet, priest and king, and on how we follow Jesus in similar roles as we become the body of Christ in our world. Jesus united these three Old Testament ministries in Himself, and then bequeathed this threefold ministry to His church through the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is a great likeness between the prophet and the priest. They both stand between God and humankind. But the direction is different. With the prophet, there is a downward movement from God to humanity = the prophet represents God to His people. The priest goes the other way = the priest represents humanity to God.

Now, let me be clear. Jesus was (and is) God incarnate. As prophet, priest, and king, Jesus had a unique ministry, one that we cannot completely imitate. We are unable to be a perfect sacrifice; we are unable to atone for the sins of anyone, let along ourselves. We have no power, and are given no power, to become a god, as our Mormon friends insist. So, when I say that we can participate in a power ministry like that of Jesus, what I am saying is that Jesus has called His people to join with Him in ministry for the advancement of His kingdom. Jesus was prophet, priest and king, and I believe He has called us also to be prophets, priests and even kings, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As Spirit-empowered priest, Jesus fulfilled four tasks that emanated from the Temple under the Old Covenant.

The first major task was that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament sacrificial system by giving Himself as the offering for sin. In the Old Testament, blood was required to atone for sin. So the first task of the priest was offering sacrifices on behalf of the people, and there were two types of sacrifices in the Old Testament. The first of the two required the shedding of the blood of a goat, lamb, calf, or bird. The blood was important because the Hebrews believed that the life was in the blood. The sinner, needing atonement, or satisfaction, from the consequences of sin, deserves to die. But in his or her stead, the priest offered the life-blood of an animal as a substitution. So, when there's the shedding of blood, it's called a 'sin offering.' This is what Jesus did on the cross - He offered Himself as the sin offering to satisfy the judgment God made against us for our sin.

How might we be involved in this work as priests? Well, the sacrifice of Jesus was a finished work. Neither the Holy Spirit nor you nor I can add anything to it. Yet, this sacrifice would be wasted if the Holy Spirit didn't bring it home to people in each succeeding generation. In fact, I have argued and will continue to argue (against the Arminians in our midst!), that apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, people defend themselves against the idea of sin, feeling God is likely to infringe on their freedom to do as they like. Without the Holy Spirit, people are not convicted of their sin or their need for God's forgiveness. For them the death of Jesus is an irrelevant detail of history. But when the Holy Spirit convicts them of sin and their need for forgiveness, the atonement of Jesus finds its mark.

Normally, in the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, He leads unbelievers to places where the Gospel is being declared or shared. The speaker speaks and the Spirit convicts, in a cooperative work. The speaker - whether a pastor on a Sunday morning, or a preacher at a revival meeting or crusade, or the faithful Christian man or woman who is sharing God's plan of salvation with a friend or co-worker - the speaker becomes a mediator, a priest, between a lost soul and his or her Creator. That's where the first of our priestly tasks comes in - pointing to Jesus as the sacrifice for sin.

It was the Holy Spirit who convicted the large number of people who repented of their sins on the day of Pentecost. And it was the Holy Spirit who convicted the thousands of people who were part of the Great Awakening. This was an important period in American history, when between 1725 and 1760, a series of revivals swept across the nation. One of the great preachers of that day was Jonathon Edwards, and one of his greatest sermons was entitled 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.' Now, I mention this sermon because most people believe that this was a fire-and-brimstone word delivered with eloquence and scorching condemnation. It was not. Edwards, wearing his granny glasses, delivered it in his usual scholarly, ultra-Congregationalist style, reading his text slowly, word by word, never looking at his audience. He made no hand motions. He did not assess the mood of the crowd. He did not walk across the stage. As a matter of fact, the massive response of those present on the first and on later occasions was as much a surprise to him as the entire Great Awakening that flowed in its wake.

The point? Conviction of sin depends not on hellfire preaching but on the power of the Holy Spirit. During the Great Awakening, the Holy Spirit used Jonathon Edwards and George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent and William Robinson and Samuel Davies, and other preachers of the time as priests to reconcile a generation of Americans to their God.

The second of the two types of sacrifice (in the Old Testament) points to Jesus' second major task as priest. This second of the two types of Old Testament sacrifice used grain, and was for thanksgiving and gratitude for God's grace. Flour was mixed with oil and made into unleavened cakes. Part of these were burned as an offering to the Lord, and part were given to the priest to be eaten. Sometimes wine was also offered. This was known as the 'cereal offering.' Jesus made provision that a form of this cereal offering continue for all generations until He comes again. We call this experience … Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, in which we break bread and drink wine. The word Eucharist is from the word eucharistas, which means 'thanksgiving.' So, Jesus bequeaths this priestly task of thanksgiving to us through our worship of God, and through our celebration of the Lord's Table.

The third major task of Jesus as priest is how He heals and cleanses all who are sick. It feels to me I barely need to touch on this part of the ministry of Jesus, since the gospels are so full of healing and cleansing and the deliverance from demons. Jesus is about the task of healing and making whole those who are broken. And He has given this same priestly task to us today. We often compartmentalize Christ's work on the cross, thinking of it exclusively in terms of personal salvation. But it is of course much more. His work on the cross leads us to reconcile with one another. If the cross reconciles us with God, then surely we, who make up the body of Christ on earth, we who have the goal to be a healthy and functional body of Christ so that we might become effective witnesses to the salvation that is only found in Christ, surely we will seek to become reconciled to one another. And if we work to become reconciled with one another, surely we will also seek to be reconciled across racial lines, and across socio-economic lines, and across other cultural facts which divide us from each other.

We have already begun to embark upon a ministry of healing in this church. A team has gone to one household to anoint with oil and pray for divine healing, and we will do more of this. We have invited people to come forward after a worship service to accept Christ as savior, or to receive the power anointing of the Holy Spirit, or to receive prayer for healing, and we will do that again this morning. And within a few months, we will begin to exercise a ministry of healing at our monthly Sunday evening worship service.

Healing takes many forms because our wounds take many forms. Every person carries within many wounds and traumas that diminish effectiveness in witness and ministry. But through prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be healed of these wounds, and healed of physical conditions, so that those healed might be more able to minister to others in their gift area. As the Spirit of Christ enters into this ministry, we become mediators, priests of healing to one another.

And the fourth major task of Jesus as priest is this - He intercedes with the Father for us. His first work of ministry was always prayer. Eventually, His disciples realized they didn't know how to pray, and they asked Him to teach them.

Prayer is also our first work of ministry. It is guided by the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit births in us the compassion of God for some person or city or nation that is in sin and bondage, and we cry out with tears for them, thus as Jesus did while on earth, we take on a priestly role. It is my belief that the Christian churches of our nation have endured a long season of prayerlessness brought on by a Western worldview that excludes God and the spiritual realm. Today the Holy Spirit is calling the people of Jesus back into prayer. He is calling us to be a house of prayer. Elders Sabrina Boltz and Becky Lyon have caught this vision and are offering in the February Newsletter to help match prayer partners together. Prayer is a vital element of our role as priests of God.

Our role as priests originates with the ministry of Jesus, who deputizes us, the church, to be His body on earth, through the power ministry of the Holy Spirit. To summarize, we function as priests in the four category areas in which Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament:

1) Cooperating with the Holy Spirit, we speak the words of the gospel with friends and co-workers, mediating (as priests) between lost souls and their Creator God. It's the Holy Spirit who convicts, but our part is to get the words out to the many, many people who need to hear
2) As Jesus did, we act as priests in bringing praise and thanksgiving to God. We do this through our regular worship and through our observation of the Lord's Supper.
3) Just as Jesus the priest reconciles humans with their God through salvation, Jesus also brings healing to His people, and asks us to be priests in this area as well. Thus, we ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to flow though us in ministries of healing and reconciliation.
4) Jesus the priest prays for us, intercedes for us with His heavenly Father, and gives to us this ministry of prayer, which is really our first and most vital ministry, to pray for one another, to wait upon the Lord, to seek vision, to be vessels in whom God births a new thing

Just as we did several weeks ago, after the Benediction this morning, I'm going to invite you to come forward if you haven't yet received Christ as your Savior and Lord. Or if you feel a need to re-commit your life to Christ. Or if you wish to receive the

anointing, the empowerment, the baptism with the Holy Spirit. We would have this anointing, so that we can more readily hear what God may be saying to us, as He uses us to birth new visions in our church.

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